The Influence of Akhenaten
Virtual Exhibit

From the beginning, the art of Ancient Egypt followed strict guidelines in its style, never veering too dramatically from the established canon. This continued relatively uninterrupted for over 1,000 years and into The New Kingdom. This all changed suddenly and drastically under the reign of a new Pharaoh, Amenhotep IV, perhaps better known under the new name that he'd given to himself, Akhenaten (meaning "effective for Aten"). Akhenaten created a new capital city and named it Akhetaten. In present day, the name of that city is el-Amarna, and because of this, art from the period during Akhenaten's rule is referred to as Amarna style. Under his father Amenhotep III, art style shifted slightly with many scenes depicting their subjects in a more naturalistic manner but this was nothing in comparison to the influence of Akhenaten on not only art, but also religion in Egypt.

Aten, the new and now only official state deity, was the Sun God and was the most powerful influence on this radical shift. The Aten disc is the artistic depiction of Aten and is central to many scenes during the Amarna period, especially scenes of Akhenaten and his family. Art was focused less on the Pharaoh himself and more on Aten, the beautiful world created by the allpowerful Sun God, as well as daily life presented in a naturalistic way. The classic grid formation used in Egyptian art was discarded in favor of a much less neat and uniformed style that would clearly show what the scene may have looked like to an actual in-room viewer. Subject matter also followed suit in the depiction of scenes that would have actually been seen by someone present at the time. People in the art too, were less idealized and actually much more detailed than ever before with Akhenaten himself being no exception with many depictions of him having very androgynous features, a stylized face, an elongated skull, and thin arms and legs. The elongated skull is a hallmark of the period's style.

The Amarna period saw two chief sculptors in Bek, and later on toward the end of Akhenaten's reign, Thutmose. Each had somewhat unique styles of their own, but they both ultimately conformed to the general style that their Pharaoh had intended. While this new era of art was a dramatic change, it was also a temporary and very short change. Akhenaten ultimately only reigned for 17 years and when his son Tutankhaten took the throne he largely reverted things back to the way they were before his father's rule. He even went so far as to make attempts to erase his influence from history and changed his name to Tutankhamun. While Akhenaten's cultural movement was short-lived and fairly insignificant to the future of Egypt, a radical change like this is something that had never been seen before in history. Out of 1,000 plus years of Pharaohs in Ancient Egypt, only one took it upon himself to use his tremendous power and influence to alter years of strict tradition and attempt to transform the very fabric of Egyptian culture overnight.

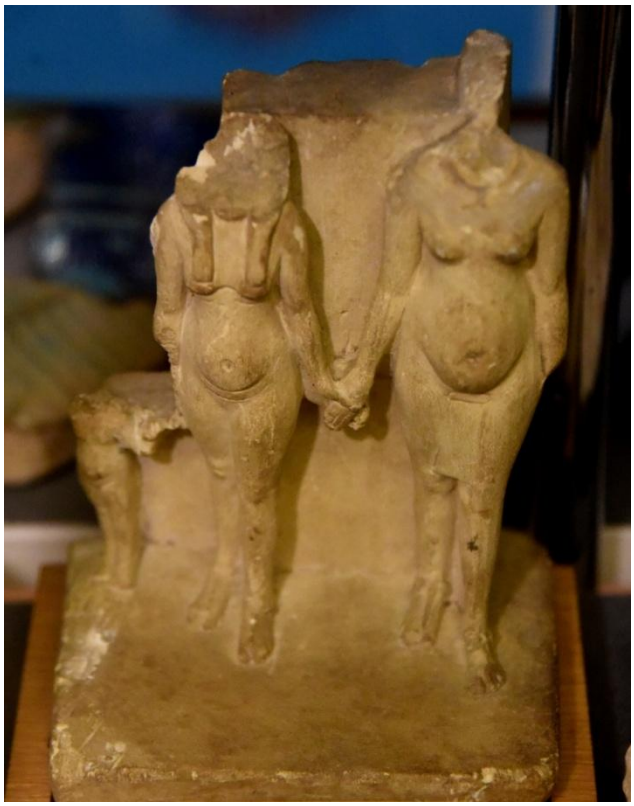
#1. Stela of Akhenaten and his Family:

Cairo Egyptian Museum
Limestone, 43.5 cm by 39 cm
el-Amarna/Akhetaten, Amarna period

This particular stela, like many at the time was kept in a private house and served as an altar to both Aten and to the "holy family" of the Pharaoh. Stelae like these which depict the royal family are perfect examples of Amarna style art. The main focuses of the work include two things: The Aten disc which is prevalent throughout art of the time, as well as the depiction of everyday life. The viewer can easily recognize parent/child affection in this scene with one of their daughters touching her mother, Nefertiti's chin. One child sitting in her lap, and a third interacting playfully with her father, the great Akhenaten. This is such a departure from previous art that focused far more heavily on the King, and instead in this picture, the King and Queen are portrayed in the same way that any family at the time might have been and it really shows the humanity of the royal family with Aten reigning about all in the center of the piece. Works like these give off almost a sense of humbleness and humility not seen in classic Egypitan art. It's also important to notice the elongated heads, the stylistic feature that Amarna art is notorious for. Another very noticeable departure from canon is the fact that the perspective of the scene is what would have been witnessed by somebody in the room at the time. Earlier scenes tended to be neatly lined up along a grid. This is far more natural and less rigid.

#2. Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and a Princess:

The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, London
Limestone
el-Amarna/Akhetaten, Amarna Period



This small statuette of carved limestone shows Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and an unidentified one of their daughters strolling along hand in hand. Other pharaohs had their sculptors immortalize their image with powerful poses, and with idealized proportions and features, but Akhenaten made no attempt to carry on tradition. He is seen here with the most exaggerated of androgynous features. Notice that he has defined breasts, a pudgy stomach, and large hips and thighs, and how Nefertiti is shown with realistic human features as well. It is unclear whether this is simply how Akhenaten looked, or if for some reason he simply liked the style and had his chief sculptor, Bek establish this as his look in art pieces. When Thutmose took over, these androgynous features became less exaggerated, so it is now and will probably forever be a mystery as to why Akhenaten was depicted in this way. Either way, this new style of sculpting the Pharaoh would become pervasive among Amarna art.

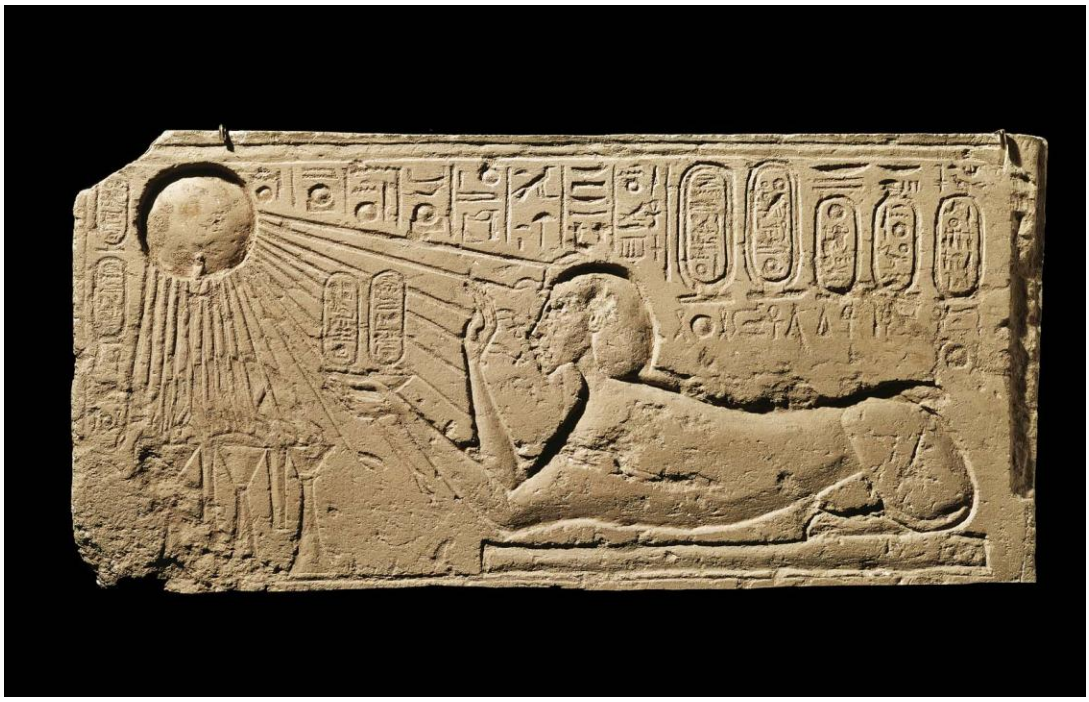
#3. Portrait of Queen Tiye with a Crown of Two Feathers:

Egyptian Museum, Berlin
Yew wood, silver, gold, blue faience
1455 B.C. originally, but reworked during Akhenaten's rule

Queen Tiye was the wife of Amenhotep III, and the beloved mother of Akhenaten. This portrait sculpture was originally commissioned by Amenhotep III, the face made out of yew wood and a gold crown on her head. Upon her husband's death, and Amenhotep IV's ascendance to the throne, the crown was removed and she was demoted to Queen Mother. Akhenaten however held his mother in the absolute highest of regard and her presence in the royal court was important to him. Akhenaten reworked her headdress to elevate her into "the realm of a goddess". Presently, the bottom portion of the headdress looks a bit plain and rather unsightly, but at the time it was covered in blue faience beads and would have looked vibrant. Some of the beads remain on parts of the headdress to this day. Extending from the headpiece are two feathers with what is likely to be the famous Aten disc directly in the center, making it perfectly clear to all viewers her high and divine status.

#4. Relief of Akhenaten as Sphinx:

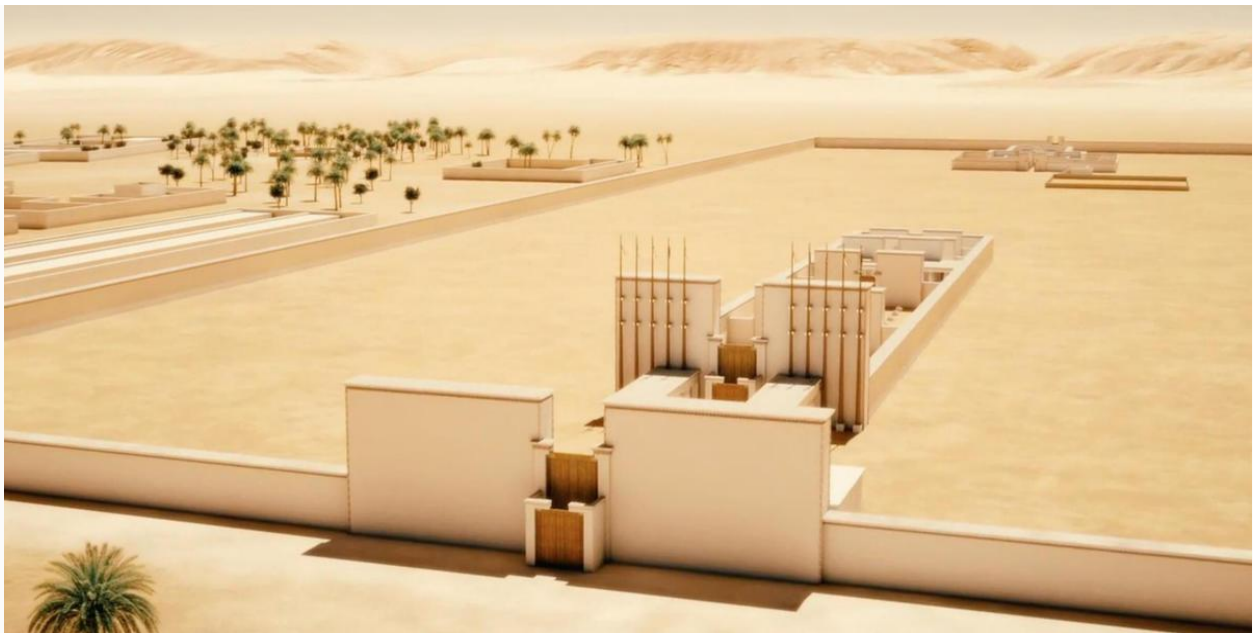
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Limestone, 51 x 105.5 x 5.2 cm
el-Amarna/Akhetaten 1349-1336 B.C.



In the previous piece of Akhenaten and his family, we've seen the Aten disc prominently featured, but in this relief, we see it being actively worshipped, and by none other than a representation of the most powerful living mortal. While not exactly a prophet, King Akhenaten did serve as a link of sorts between humans and their Sun God. We see him here reaching out and receiving its rays while giving offerings. While Akhenaten did discard much of the Egyptians' long held tradition, its interesting to note that one of the most recognizable symbols of Ancient Egypt, The Sphinx did not receive such a treatment. The King's easily recognizable face sits atop a mostly traditional depiction of The Sphinx, even including the traditional uraeus of kingship on his head. But in classic Akhenaten fashion, we see one major and glaring difference as human arms reach out from the front of the statue to offer praise and offerings. Most images of a Sphinx sit rigid and motionless, but this relief actually manages to show a fair amount of movement and life, not only in the arms of Sphinx Akhenaten, but also as the creator of life, The Aten reaches out with some of its hands holding ankhs. The ankh is a renowned hieroglyphic symbol meaning "life". The ankh being another classic and traditional symbol that Akhenaten kept in public consciousness. In this relief, simply put, we see the Aten bringing life to the world, and the King, a surrogate of the people worshipping it.

#5. The Great Temple of the Aten:

Mud brick, stone. Faience, colored glass and stones as decoration
el-Amarna/Akhetaten, Amarna Period



With a new state religion came an entirely new take on what a place of worship should look like. Its mud brick outer walls enveloped a massive area and contained two main buildings as well as a few smaller buildings such as small sanctuaries and a slaughterhouse for meat offerings. One would enter through the front pylon, making their way through a colonnade into the Long Hall which was a huge complex with offering tables throughout. At the end was a stretch of mostly empty land of around 900 feet until reaching the other main building, the sanctuary. The sanctuary was surrounded by smaller chapels and contained a statue of Akhenaten as well as a large altar and several offering tables. Both buildings were originally constructed of mud brick, but later rebuilt with stone. The architecture itself was nothing extraordinary, but the buildings of the temple, the Long Hall in particular contained many reliefs featuring the Aten disc and the King and Queen's worship of it. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this new temple was that rather than an enclosed temple with statues of the god to worship, The Great Temple of the Aten had no roof. Worshippers of Aten would enter the temple and worship toward the sky to the sun god itself instead of bowing to a representation or a statue, in an unprecedented and completely original new style of worship.

#6. Blue Faience Monkey:

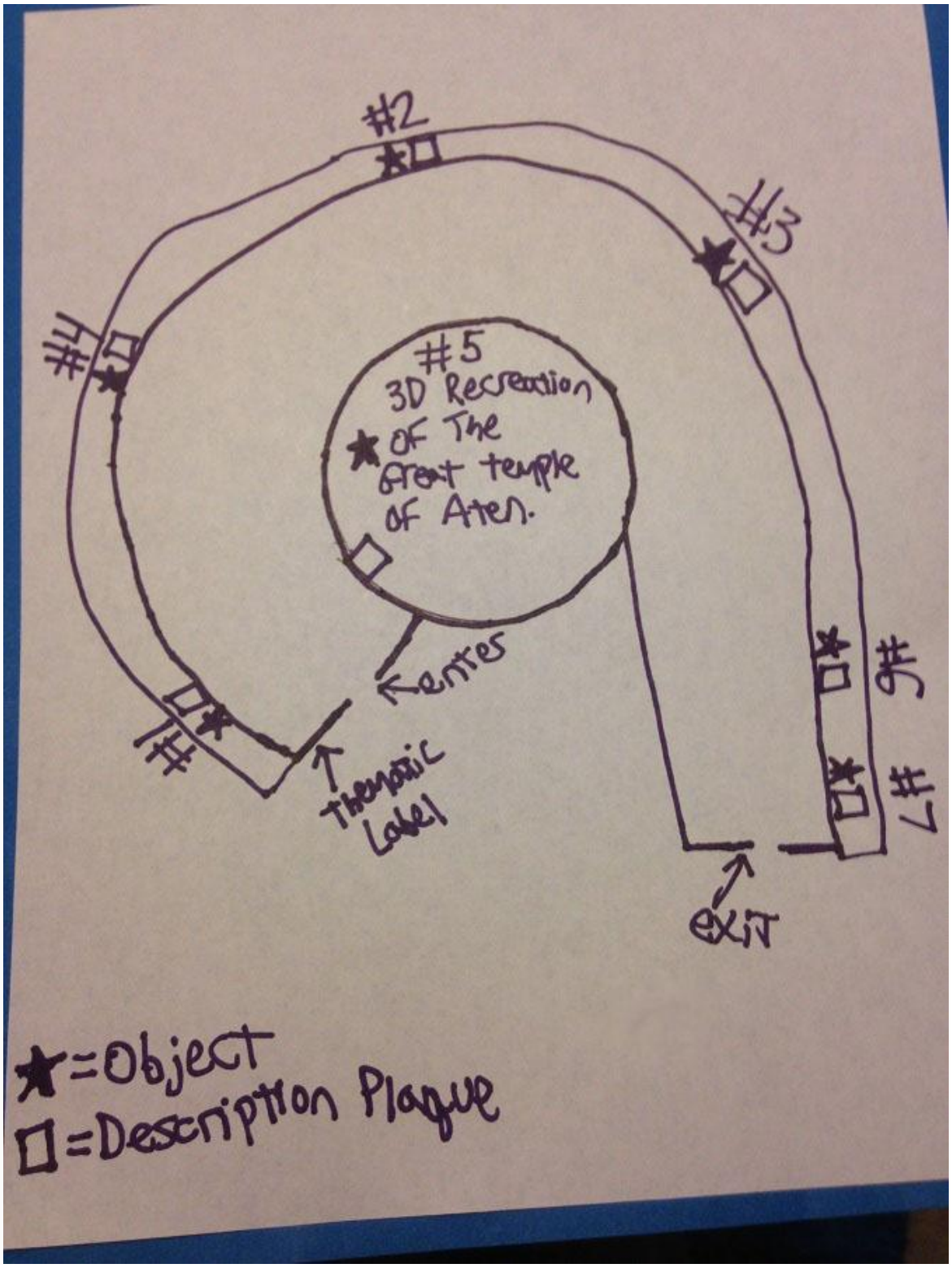
Brooklyn Museum
Blue faience
1352-1336 B.C., el-Amarna/Akhetaten

Dated at somewhere during Akhenaten's reign, this blue faience statuette is a touching work dedicated to the beloved pet monkey of an upper class family of the Amarna period. The hole in its ear likely long ago had a ring in it signifying the monkey's status as a pet. Virtually nothing is known about the statuette's creator or who exactly his owners were. We know only, with relative certainty that he belonged to a wealthy family because monkeys are not native to Egypt and would have been transported quite a ways to them as somewhat of an exotic luxury good. Judging by the relative roughness of the work its entirely possible that it was made by one of the family members themselves or maybe commissioned to a small-time artist for a small fee. The piece gives us a glimpse into the life of a non-royal family at the time, just as the pharaoh's family life was a salient subject of art pieces of the time. I really love this piece because it shows the love that the family had for their pet monkey, so much so that they would dedicate him or her its own statuette made out of material that wouldn't exactly have been cheap to the average citizen. Because of that, the humble pet monkey has been immortalized as a testament to his family's love for him. Separated by thousands of years, people still care about their animals in much the same way.

#7. Dwarf Holding a Jar:

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Boxwood
1349-1336 B.C.

In this rather cartoonish looking statuette of a small servant or worker carrying a much too large pot or jar, his back is bent to the side harshly as he struggles to hold it up. While he's given faint facial features, none of them are sharp or clearly defined, so it's unlikely that this statue was bent to depict anyone's likeness in particular. This piece is neat for two reasons in particular. First, because it's actually a vessel used to hold expensive cosmetic products such as lotion. Just as this statue of a servant holds a pot of cosmetics, we could imagine a full sized, real worker carrying around the heavy pot, filled with the very same substance for his wealthy master or employer (depending on just who exactly this dwarf is). Secondly, this was likely a gift from Akhenaten or Nefertiti (or both) to one of their close and wealthy associates because in tiny hieroglyphic writing on the side of the jar is an inscription of each of their names. Akhenaten's father, Amenhotep III was also known for giving similar gifts to his associates. The platform on the bottom allows this to stand up without much risk of toppling over and was probably placed on a prominent table or stand in its owner's house proudly displayed as a gift from the pharaoh for all visitors to see.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3D Recreation
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